

Chapter 14 – Junior School

Young John Ziyambi sat in the Bentley's back seat, staring out of the window. His mother's attempts to engage him in conversation were met with one-word answers. Norah remembered her first drive to Salisbury two years earlier. Then, she found everything she saw fascinating, and she was a young adult woman. She could only imagine how six-year-old John felt.

But John's thoughts were not on the passing scenery. Rather, they were focused on Aneni, the person he loved most in the world. Only when Mortimer turned the Bentley into Judge Barclay's driveway did he snap out of his pensive mood. The large old bungalow with its manicured garden caught his attention as he looked at the surroundings with unmistakable awe.

'Here we are, John,' said Norah, wanting to capitalise on the moment. 'This is where you will live.' Mortimer unloaded the suitcases from the car boot and carried them to Norah's front door. When Norah opened the door and ushered John into the large room, his eyes grew wide. Until now, he'd only seen the mud huts of his village. In front of him stood a modern room with a newly added single bed in the far corner.

'That will be your bed, John. Put your clothes and other things in the cupboard by your bed.'

Norah showed John the bathroom and made him wash his hands with soap.

'Wait here. Mama will be back in a minute.'

Norah left her room and walked to the kitchen to say hello to Philemon. Stanford was also there.

'Welcome back, Norah. Thanks to you, Philemon is in the habit of needing help with dinner. Now you are back, you can relieve me from having to assist him each evening. Where is your son? Go fetch him. The boss wants to meet him.'

Norah returned to her room to get John. For a moment she considered changing his clothes but realised nothing in his suitcase would look much better. She led him to the kitchen, where Philemon greeted him with a big smile, and Stanford patted him on the head.

'Come, Norah, let's introduce John to the boss.'

Stanford led them to the lounge and knocked on the doorframe.

'Sir, may I present to you young John Ziyambi, son of Norah?'

'Enough of the ceremony, Stanford.'

Norah and John entered the room to find the boss sitting at his desk with his usual glass of Scotch in his left hand.

'Good to see you back, Norah. Come here, boy. It's no use hiding behind your mother's skirt. So, this is your young lad, Norah?'

'Yes, Sir. John, say good evening to the master.'

The situation overawed John, and he searched for words in his limited vocabulary. After hesitating, a shy 'Hello' was all he could manage.

'I'm looking forward to getting to know you better, young man.'

John did not respond to the boss's words.

After he and Norah left the lounge, Judge Barclay spoke to Stanford.

‘Ask Norah what clothes the lad has, Stanford. Mortimer can drive her and John into town and buy him some outfits. We can’t have him running around here looking like an urchin. What will my friends think? They’ll say I’m hiring child labour. Tell Norah to put it through our expense account. Or better still, ask Ms Anderson at Greatermans to give him whatever he needs and put it on my account.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Tomorrow evening, I’d like him dressed in something appropriate for someone who lives at this address.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Isn’t he starting school this year? Find out which is the best school for African boys in Salisbury. Go with Norah to enrol him and ask them what he’ll need for his school uniform.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

The next few days were a flurry of activity, preparing John for life in the city at Judge Hugh Barclay’s residence. School was starting within the week, and the boss liked everything done right.

In the meantime, John experienced his first taste of European food. Breakfast under the shade of Stanford’s veranda was his favourite. Each morning, he sat enjoying the food and company, dressed in one of his new t-shirts and shorts.

A child at the house was a novelty, and all the adults spoilt him. Mortimer, the driver, and Thomas, the irascible gardener, both took a liking to him. John spent most of the first few days helping Thomas in the garden.

Soon, it was Sunday evening, the last day before his schooldays began. It was Norah’s turn to cook the boss’s dinner, and tonight it would be sausages, mashed potatoes, and green peas. John sat on the kitchen stool while Norah prepared the dinner. When it was ready, Norah noticed he was missing. There was no time now; she’d look for him after she served the boss’s dinner.

Norah knocked on the doorframe of the lounge to tell the boss his dinner was ready. As she entered the room, she saw John sitting opposite the boss, chatting away at his desk.

‘Oh! I’m sorry, Sir. John is being a nuisance.’

‘No problem, Norah. He’s not a nuisance. We were having an interesting chat.’

Norah served the boss’s dinner and afterwards cleared the table and washed the dishes. Then she and John enjoyed their dinner with Stanford under his veranda roof. Later, back in their room, Norah asked John what the boss said to him.

‘He said I must go with him and Mortimer in the car tomorrow morning. After Mortimer drops him at his office, he will take me to school and pick me up at lunchtime. He also said I must work hard at school and not waste my time because schooldays are soon gone.’

‘What else did you talk about?’

‘He asked me about our village, so I told him.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘I told him how nice it was, and I also told him I was going to marry Aneni when I grow up.’

‘What did he say about that?’

‘Nothing. He just smiled.’

‘I asked him where his wife was.’

‘You shouldn’t ask the boss questions like that. They’re called personal questions. You shouldn’t ask anybody personal questions.’

‘He didn’t mind, Mama.’

‘So what did he say?’

‘He said he never had a wife. He was married to his job.’

Morning, and John’s first day of school arrived. Norah woke him early to avoid delaying the boss, who always left for work at seven forty-five. After his shower, John dressed in his new school uniform. He stood admiring himself in the mirror in his khaki shirt and shorts, and S buckle school belt. His socks almost reached his knees, and his black leather shoes shone in a shaft of sunlight coming through the window.

Philemon changed the morning routine, preparing John’s breakfast early. He also wrapped peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches in greaseproof paper, and packed them with a small bottle of orange juice in a plastic box for him at playtime.

John brushed his teeth and was ready when Mortimer called him to the car. Mortimer opened the door to the passenger front seat for him to enter. Soon, the boss emerged from the house and stepped into the Bentley’s back seat. The drive from the house to the boss’s office was short. Mortimer pulled up the car, and the boss slid out from the back seat. ‘Now don’t forget John, Mortimer will pick you up after school.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Mortimer drove on towards John’s school, on the edge of the city.

‘Attending school is lucky for you. I had only a little school. You must work hard and not waste your time at school. Then one day, you can have an important job like Stanford.’

There were already dozens of children at the school when Mortimer pulled up near the school gate. ‘I’ll pick you up at lunchtime.’

John waved goodbye as Mortimer eased the big Bentley past the school crowd spilling onto the street.

As John turned to enter the school grounds, a boy his age addressed him.

‘Your dad must be rich to drive a car like that?’

‘He’s not my dad, he’s my driver.’

‘Your driver? If you have a driver, you must be rich.’

Before he could answer, a tall African man shouted, ‘New boys, follow me.’

John and his new companion, Richard, joined the pupils clustered around the teacher. A minority of older new boys were soon directed elsewhere, while the kindergarten pupils were ushered into a hall, where their names were taken and checked with the registration records.

As they waited to go to their classroom, Richard continued his conversation. ‘My dad is also rich, but he only drives a Jaguar.’

John didn’t know what a Jaguar looked like, so he didn’t respond, but Richard continued with his questions. He soon noticed John’s brief responses in halting English.

‘Where are you from? You sound like you’re from the bush.’

Another pupil overheard the comment and shouted, ‘Hey, we have a bush boy with us...’ His voice trailed off as he caught John’s icy glare.

Another boy, bigger than the rest, added, ‘Is he a bush boy or a bush baby?’

The children laughed, but before things went further, the teacher called them to attention and led them to a classroom. John hurried to claim a desk in the front row by the window. The big boy demanded his seat, but when John showed no sign of moving, he chose a desk in the back row. But before moving on, he threatened to resolve the dispute at morning break.

Richard was reassuring. 'Don't worry about him. Just because his father owns a supermarket, he thinks he's someone special. Oliver didn't really want your desk. He just wanted to show the others he's the boss in this classroom.'

'Do you know him?'

'Yes, he was in my nursery school. He's a bully.'

Administrative matters occupied the first part of the morning. John discovered everything was in English, and the other children spoke the language well. Embarrassment was a new emotion for him, and he was reluctant to speak. Richard didn't seem to mind, but several kids laughed or rolled their eyes when John tried to answer the teacher's questions, confirming his enrolment details.

Worst of all, he didn't know his home address. 'But you live in The Avenues, don't you?' said the teacher.

'Yes, Sir,'

John heard someone whisper, 'If he lives in The Avenues, his parents must be servant's.'

The bully didn't follow up his threats to resolve the desk issue during break-time, but as he passed John's desk, he muttered he'd not forgotten about it.

After the bell rang, signalling the end of school, John walked to the school gate, where Mortimer waited for him nearby.

'So how was school?'

'OK.'

'What did you learn today?'

'Nothing.'

'If you learnt nothing, why are you going to school?'

'Don't know.'

At home, the questions and John's answers were no different.

The next morning, Mortimer again dropped him near the school gate.

One classmate commented, 'Servants don't come to school in a car like that.'

'Maybe his dad is white,' said another.

'A black boy with a white dad? He must be a zebra.'

It didn't take John long to realise his classmates nicknamed him the zebra.

The following week, he asked Mortimer to drop him a few blocks before his school. He didn't want his classmates' continuing speculation about his circumstances, but he told Mortimer he liked to walk.

At break-time, Oliver, the big class bully, led his smug back row friends into chanting at John, 'You're a bush boy zebra.'

Others soon joined in, and John tried to get Oliver to stop the chant.

But Oliver was in his element, leading the others with his taunts. 'Make me stop, bush boy zebra, if you can.'

Without fanfare or fuss, John stepped up to Oliver and punched him in the nose. The big boy hit the ground with a thud. He wailed as blood ran from his nostrils. The others all

stopped their chanting, wide-eyed at the spectacle. They never realised the bush made boys so tough, much tougher than city boys.

John lost his nickname as fast as he'd got it, and soon he found himself with a growing circle of friends. Oliver, the classroom bully, had wasted no time in asserting his dominance over the other kids, but when John put him in his place, many transferred their support to him. No longer was he the classroom outsider.